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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to revitalize and reform its curriculum, the Associate of Arts-Associate of Science (AA-AS) Degree Review Committee (DRC) of Connecticut's Norwalk Community College issued a curriculum report proposing a 21 credit, limited distributive core for the AS degree (which accounts for 80% of the college's degree recipients). This proposal should not be put into effect, however, since the DRC's recommendations provide a misleading and narrow definition of general education as liberal arts or non-vocational classes. Moreover, the proposal places an emphasis on minimum requirements, doesn't provide students with an opportunity to see the connectedness of knowledge, doesn't provide a balanced distribution of topics in the core, and may limit the adaptability of the curriculum to meet changing educational needs. A better alternative would be a common core of five courses, including interdisciplinary and departmental offerings, for all associate degree students which would provide flexibility for cultural literacy and multicultural education, raise academic standards by maintaining a minimum competency level requirement for entry to core classes, and provide more focused developmental and English as a Second Language programs. In addition, it would hold all faculty responsible for student skill development, eliminate an "educational underclass," rejuvenate faculty by giving them responsibility for curriculum development, and provide a connected view of learning. Despite concerns related to the implementation and transferability of interdisciplinary courses, the college would improve through the process and be on the forefront of curriculum reform. Contains 35 references. (MAB)

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ED 374 863

NORWALK COMMUNITY COLLEGE AA-AS DEGREE REVIEW COMMITTEE

CURRICULUM REPORT

AUGUST 21, 1989

The undergraduate curricula in many institutions are out of kilter. This condition is due, in part, to unrelenting financial pressures which leads to an intense market orientation of institutions and also to keen internal competition among departments within institutions. It is due in part to the excessive demands of professional accrediting agencies...it is accelerated by the failure of presidents, academic vice presidents and deans to provide leadership in the development of educational policies and plans. (Bowen and Schuster, 283)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE OF PROPOSAL.....1

B. CURRENT CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM.....1

C. GENERAL EDUCATION DEFINED.....2

II. PROPOSAL.....5

III. OBJECTIONS TO MAJORITY POSITION.....5

IV. ADVANTAGES OF A COMMON CORE CURRICULUM TO NCC.....6

V. ANSWERS TO POSSIBLE AREAS OF CONCERN.....8

A recent Washington Post series on higher education portrayed community colleges as vocational centers that denied students access to economic and social betterment. The assertion was made that community colleges may actually limit some students' chances to achieve higher education. (CTFC Times, June 6, 1989). Actual data exist to support this point of view. (Zwerling, 1988) Roueche, Baker and Roueche stated that "The promise of open access will not bring about the true opportunity that it promises unless teaching (at the community college level) is improved and **curriculum is reshaped.**" (p.24)

Recent budget deficits in Connecticut and other states have already impacted negatively upon community colleges. Because financial shortfalls show no sign of lessening in the foreseeable future, curriculum design will need to be more cost effective and profitable to the individual institution.

In addition, there is presently a national movement toward centralizing most aspects of higher education. Increased interference on the part of Boards of Trustees and state legislatures in the day-to-day operation of institutions of higher learning is accelerating. All this adds up to the importance of having the faculty exercise its traditional responsibility for revitalizing and reforming the curriculum. **If we don't do it, external groups will do it for us.**

Current Context of Educational Reform - the National Scene

In April, 1983, "A Nation At Risk," by the National Commission on Excellence in Education examined the entire educational system of the United States from K through graduate school. This study was followed by another, the Twentieth Century Fund's "Making the Grade." In addition, Ernest Boyer's "High School," John Goodlad's "A Place Called School," and the Educational Committee of the States' "Action For Excellence," decried the state of education in America today, particularly the high schools.

More recently, the National Institute of Education's "Involvement In Learning," the National Endowment For the Humanities' "To Reclaim a Legacy," and the Association of American Colleges' "Integrity in the College Curriculum" called for improvement in the quality of outcomes in higher education.

In 1984, the AACJC launched an Associate Degree Preferred Campaign to directly address needed improvements in Associate Degree curricula. They issued two policy statements:

> The Associate Degree must indicate that the holder has developed proficiencies sufficient to prepare for upper division collegiate work or to enter directly into a specific occupation with confidence. The degree should

be awarded only for completion of a coherent program of study designed for a specific purpose.

Associate Degree programs designed primarily for immediate employment should be designated as an Associate Degree in Applied Science. (AACJC Letter, Oct. 1884)

Developments in the States to Improve Associate Degree Work

There have been state-wide developments aimed at improving Associate Degree work. In 1985, Illinois issued a status report on Associate Degrees awarded by Illinois Public Community Colleges calling for enhanced academic standards and adherence to AACJC policy statements. The same year, the Board of Governors of California's community colleges formed a Task Force on Academic Quality to recommend ways to strengthen the associate degree. In 1983, the Washington State Board For Community College Education published draft guidelines to improve standards for the degree, and the Massachusetts' Board of Regents revised its community college to university transfer agreements. Colorado has been examining its associate degree general education requirements, and New Jersey, in 1977, instituted its Basic Skills Assessment Program. In 1983, the Virginia Council of Higher Education established entrance requirements for institutions of higher learning, and, in 1985, the Southern Regional Education Board's Commission For Educational Quality recommended mandatory testing of basic skills at the beginning of the first year of study and at the termination of the second; such testing is now mandatory in the State of Florida. **This year (1989), the Massachusetts Board of Regents of Higher Education has mandated a core curriculum for all state colleges to insure that students have been exposed to various areas of study, including history and third world culture.**

General Education - Defined

There is considerable confusion in Academe about what constitutes General Education. Many confuse it with the Liberal Arts - those courses which are not professionally or career oriented. Those who accept this definition claim that general education requirements presently make up approximately 50% of most college curriculums. At Norwalk Community College, practically every course of study includes at least 50% general education (liberal arts) courses, although students are given wide latitude in choosing among them. It is possible, for example, for a student to graduate from NCC without ever having taken a course in history, math or science.

Others define General Education to mean certain courses that all students must take, regardless of major. At NCC, we presently have a 12-credit core in place for practically all of our graduates -

6 credits of English, 3 of speech and 3 of a social science elective (most often, psychology). Again, this approach in no way insures that certain areas of knowledge are being transmitted.

We see General Education in a different light and agree with Boyer and Levine in claiming that the mission of General Education should be to make individuals aware that they belong to a human community to which they are accountable..

> **General Education courses should show individuals that they also share significant relationships with a larger community. In this matter, general education reveals our connectedness. It is the educational tool we reach for in our search for revival of the frayed social compact.** (Boyer and Levine, 18)

The history of General Education shows that demands for curriculum reform in America occur when the balance between individualism and community is in disarray.

The first General Education revival occurred around World War I when, in 1914, President Alexander Meiklejohn of Amherst College introduced a survey course entitled "Social and Economic Institutions," designed to introduce students to the "humanistic" sciences and to implement the ideas of Dewey who claimed that the rapid expansion of knowledge called for a survey approach. In 1919, Columbia University introduced its acclaimed Contemporary Civilization course. What followed was a plethora of survey courses at colleges and universities nationwide. With the end of the Wilson era, the reform impulse slackened. The 1920's were a time of unbridled individualism and materialism. College curriculums were characterized by overspecialization, excessive vocationalism and a free elective system (not unlike the situation today!) Consequently, in the late twenties there was a renewed interest in General Education. It's promoters, however, were confused about its goals and values, and the movement faltered.

The present General Education revival was instituted in 1977 when the Carnegie Foundation For the Advancement of Teaching issued a report that characterized the state of General Education in America's colleges and universities as "a disaster area," blaming broad distribution requirements and free electives for an educational product that was "fragmented" and "value free."

The chaos and rampant individualism of the 1960's were blamed. William Bennett, E.D. Hirsch, Ernest Boyer and others urged a return to a curriculum that emphasized shared values and cultural literacy.

> **To Bennett's credit, he resists the temptation to go after the students who, beginning in the 1960's, demanded 'relevance' when what they really wanted was sleep. Like**

> **Pogo, he insists that the enemy is 'us' - teachers of the humanities who have given up on the great task of transmitting a 'culture' in favor of offering a curriculum that is a 'self service cafeteria' through which students pass without being nourished.** (Kriegel, 714)

In sum, each General Education reform movement of the past moved toward a sense of community and away from social fragmentation.

It is our contention that, today, more than ever, the claims of community are weak. Most community colleges, like NCC, continue to offer a smorgasbord of courses. We desperately need to return to the agenda of General Education ..."those experiences, relationships, and ethical concerns that are common to all of us by virtue of our membership in the human family." (Boyer and Levine, 18)

Curriculum Design in Delivering General Education

Colleges organize the content of General Education in two ways - narrowly, on the basis of traditional disciplines, or broadly, on the basis of interdisciplinary themes or courses. Neither way insures that the goals of general education are met.

Additionally, General Education can be delivered in one of two ways - broadly by giving students wide choice among courses, somewhat less broadly, by restricting that choice to two or three options (e.g. take American History or History of Western Civilization) or narrowly, by requiring that all degree students take certain courses. The former is called a distributive or restricted distributive core, the latter a common or fixed core of learning.

We agree with the recommendation on curriculum issued in April,1989, by the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, entitled, "Building Communities: A Vision For a New Century." It states:

> * All community college associate degree students should complete a core curriculum , one that provides historical perspective, an understanding of our social institutions, knowledge of science and technology, and an appreciation of the visual and performing arts.
>
> * We urge that the core curriculum of the community college contain an international perspective, including a study of non western cultures.
>
> * We recommend that the core curriculum be integrated into technical and career programs so that students place

their specialization in a larger context and relate learning to contemporary problems.

* Finally, community colleges should find creative new ways by which the goals of common learning can be accomplished - through all college seminars, film series and symposia, for example. Nontraditional arrangements such as these can be especially important for students enrolled in non-degree or part time programs. (Building Communities, 19)

Proposal

1. **We strongly believe that the recommendations of the AA-AS Degree Review Committee (as of June 5, 1989) should not be put into effect** because t e curriculum recommendations of the Norwalk Community College AA-AS degree review committee **do not reflect recent studies and developments in the field of higher education curriculum.**

2. **We advocate a Common Core (certain courses that all students must take) for all associate degree recipients at NCC...** a core that would not only introduce students to essential areas of knowledge but would also enable them to see the connectedness of the disciplines. Ultimately, the core of courses would assist students in affirming their individualism while fostering the awareness that they are part of a national and international community with responsibilities as well as rights.

3. The core should consist of five courses that all students seeking an associate degree would take. Some of the courses may be interdisciplinary or thematic ; others may appropriately be departmental offerings (English, history or sociology, for example, if they look sufficiently outward and are broad enough in their purpose).

4. The present AA-AS Degree Review Committee should be immediately disbanded and replaced by a Faculty Committee elected by the faculty. This action would be consistent with AAUP guidelines asserting that the faculty has primary responsibility for the Curriculum.

Objections to Majority Positions

Our specific objections to the NCC AA-AS Degree Review Committee's proposed 21 credit limited distributive core for the AS degree (80% of NCC's degree recipients) are:

1. A somewhat misleading and narrow definition of General Education - one that defines General Education as

liberal arts or non-vocational courses.
2. Our concern that it will be possible for a student to graduate from NCC without being exposed to important areas of knowledge.

3. The emphasis that is placed on minimum requirements. Is MA 099 - the equivalent of 9th grade math - acceptable for associates degree credit? Does such a low level of mathematics prepare the AS Degree student for the demands of the workplace?

4. Our concern that students will not be given the opportunity to see the connectedness of all knowledge.

5. The fact that General Education requirements would not be equally distributed among the general areas of knowledge and thus lack balance. For example, the distribution that is recommended allocates 12 credits to the English/Humanities area, 6 to Science/Math and 3 to Social Science (with the student being able to choose **any** social science course!). This is clearly in conflict with the Connecticut Board of Trustees Resolution adopted on May 18,1987 which states:

> The General Education component of Associate degree programs shall include a **balanced** distribution of required courses or restricted electives in the humanities, arts, natural and physical sciences, mathematics and social sciences comprising at least 25% of the minimum requirements for the degree...

6. Our concern that requirements will be based entirely on existing courses and content which, in some cases, are inadequate for meeting today's educational needs. We specifically object to the presumption that course innovation will result automatically in the loss of credit for students who transfer.

Advantages of a Core Curriculum For NCC

1. Cultural Literacy - A common core of learning is particularly important for a multi-cultural population such as we have at NCC. Curricular fragmentation does not foster within students the common bonds that create a sense of community and common reference points. Minority and foreign-born populations are growing; demographic projections indicate a workforce made up primarily of women and minorities. (NCC Long Range Plan)

2. Higher Academic Standards - Students who do not have the necessary skills to enter core courses would not be allowed to enroll in those courses until they have attained an appropriate skill level. We foresee the development of "pre-college" offerings as a way of assuring that college level core courses need not be "watered down" and to prepare students for successful

completion of their core courses.

3. More Focused Developmental and ESL Programs - Since all students would be required to take the same five courses, our Communication Skills and ESL specialists would have specific "core" courses to focus on so that they could help students acquire the content and skills needed for success in these courses. Critics of traditional remedial or developmental writing programs have argued that students in these courses perceive them in a negative light because they are often regarded as substandard and irrelevant. (Salas,5)

4. All faculty would be responsible for skill development Recent research stresses skills reinforcement throughout the curriculum. Core courses would be designed to insure that the groundwork of developmental and ESL faculty would continue throughout the curricula - all courses would include writing, reading, speaking and listening activities.

5. A Common Core would particularly benefit Minority Students - At the present time, many minority students elect or are encouraged to take less demanding courses for a variety of reasons. A Common Core is a way of promoting true educational equality and eliminating an "educational underclass." Even on lower educational levels, researchers are finding that tracking students hurts those most in need of educational support.

6. A Common Core would upgrade the level of other courses in the curriculum - When students take core courses early in their college career, faculty find that the knowledge and skills necessary for success in higher level courses have been acquired. Ausabel and others in the field of Educational Psychology stress the importance of hierarchical structures of knowledge. The present cafeteria style of course selection works against learning by failing to provide students with the necessary prerequisites for academic success. (Chickering)

7. Faculty Rejuvenation - The faculty would be responsible for the core, and, in some instances, the courses might be inter-departmental in nature. The Process of coming together to discuss students' needs and to design course content would be extremely beneficial in breaking down the departmental narrowness and factionalism that presently exists. Faculty collaboration would also promote better teaching, for faculty would no longer operate in a vacuum but would work together as a dedicated team helping each other develop and define their professional skills .

8. Students and faculty would more readily see the connectedness of all learning - Our present way of delivering education is based on the disciplines. A distinct disadvantage is that learning is often fragmented. Students fail to get the "big picture."

9. The Core would address neglected areas of scholarship - for

example, Women's Studies, Black Studies, International Studies, etc. could readily become an integral part of the core courses.

10. Norwalk Community College would have a distinct identity - the community that we serve will realize that we are a serious and distinctive educational institution. Many traditional students who now use us as a place to take a few courses in order to gain access to a "better" institution might consider the cost effectiveness of an NCC Associates Degree. Colleges that our students transfer to would be more likely to enter into effective articulation agreements that meet the needs of both institutions.

Possible Areas of Concern

1. A Common Core of Learning would deny students the right to choose - Wide choice in the college curriculum is mostly a product of the influence of the 1960's and 70's, a period that has been blamed by many researchers for our current mess. John Roueche has stated that a lack of required sequence very often leads to student failure and that the problem of the open access college is intensified when students are given too many choices in the curriculum. (Roueche and Baker,6) Ethyle Wolfe of Brooklyn College states that "Free choice is really based on student ignorance. How can students choose well when they have had such limited educational experience and are not always counseled in a comprehensive and continuing fashion?" (address at Teachers' College, Columbia University, Feb. 10, 1989)

Additionally, freedom of choice leads to inappropriate placement, cultural fragmentation, unbalanced education and lack of hierarchical structure in curriculum design.

2. Interdisciplinary courses are non-traditional and result in a "watering down" of the disciplines - Interdisciplinary teaching does not depend on the joining of two or more disciplines. Rather, it depends on the existence of a point of view toward the subject matter and toward knowledge in general. In other words, "... it is possible for courses to be taught by only one teacher on single subjects to be interdisciplinary if connections with other subjects are sought or an effort is made to overcome the isolation of the subject." (White, 6)

Because courses based on disciplines are now the traditional way of delivering education, it does not necessarily follow that it is the best way or that what has existed in the past is relevant for the present and future:

> Today's imposing panoply of academic disciplines and departments is simply an historical artifact. It reflects the evolution (and fossilization) of a single human institution - the university. We should remind

> ourselves from time to time that these artificial structures do not exhaust the totality of human experience, or even the universe of knowledge. (Boyer and Levine, 24)

There are numerous disadvantages to discipline based courses - they lead to fragmentation of knowledge and rarely allow the student to see the "big picture." In addition, faculty is sometimes isolated from each other, concerned with their own departmental interests which sometimes stands in the way of effective interaction with colleagues and leads to feelings of isolation.

3. No other community colleges have interdisciplinary courses - Many community colleges have begun to introduce thematic courses. A list of all who have done so is too long to list here . A few well known examples are Miami - Dade, St. Petersburg College, the Community College of Philadelphia and Kirkwood Community College. In Washington State, a consortium of two and four year colleges have experimented with programs that emphasize collaborative teaching, thematically grouped courses and writing across the curriculum. New Jersey's Raritan Valley Community College, in an effort to increase students' global awareness, developed two six credit courses integrating Western Civilization and writing instruction. Called Introduction to Humanities I and II, students transcripts show credit for 6 credits of English Composition and 6 credits of Western Civilization. The National Endowment For the Humanities is presently working with many community colleges who are committed to curriculum innovation.

4. These courses exist in other states but not in Connecticut - Other states are clearly moving in the direction of integrated core curricula and thematic courses. The AACJC's Building Communities calls for a common core of learning that "is more than a grab bag of unrelated courses." Massachusetts has just required a core curriculum for all state colleges to insure that students have certain competencies and are exposed to important areas of knowledge, including third world culture and history. (The Chronicle, June 28, 1989) Can Connecticut be far behind? While the world is obviously changing, why are we standing still?

5. Thematic or Interdisciplinary courses won't transfer - One answer to this concern is found in the Process of curriculum change. Miami Dade, for example, worked from 1974 - 1978 to develop a thematic integrated core required of all Associate Degree students. It was not fully implemented until 1981. Time was needed not only to prepare courses but to test them out on a few sections before implementation. Time was also needed to work out articulation agreements.

Some institutions find curriculum change as being the essential element in improving transfer prospects for students. The Community College of Philadelphia, for example, designed a two year,

integrated interdisciplinary core curriculum as part of their Transfer Opportunities Program. Santa Monica Community College also developed an integrated core curriculum predominately as a way to enrich the students' transfer effort.

The a priori belief that new courses can't be transferred hampers curriculum reform and doesn't take new conditions into account. It is a weak argument for maintaining the status quo when the status quo is no longer meeting present needs.

6. What about students who just want to take a course or two? Only those students who plan to get an associates degree will be required to take the core courses, although the courses should be open to all students who show competencies for successfully completing them. Going back to a matriculation procedure would be beneficial, not only for increasing the effectiveness of the core program but as a means of assisting students in making a firm commitment to an academic program. A more focused course of studies would greatly assist the Faculty and Student Affairs personnel in appropriately counseling students (we would have a clearer idea of their intentions), thereby increasing student retention.

7. What about career programs where students have professionally mandated courses? In such cases, nursing for example, substitutions could be made for core courses. At Miami Dade, for instance, there is an alternate to the Natural Science requirement. Students may substitute another science or math course to meet this requirement. **It should be emphasized, however, that the practicalities of liberal learning also contribute to successful careers.**

8. A Core Curriculum is aimed at a particular audience. All students (with the exception of those needing specific courses to meet professional requirements) would greatly benefit from a core of common learning. A possible exception would be those adults who already have college degrees, and, in some instances, those who, because of life experience or competencies, would be able to test out of the core requirements.

9. It won't work, because we don't have adequate placement tests and/or procedures in place - Again, this is part of the Process. There will be time to get the expertise and knowledge needed to do adequate assessments. At least we will have the advantage of knowing what we are aiming for.

10. Core courses will result in large sections, thereby changing the intimate teacher/student relationship at NCC - Classes don't necessarily have to be large. We presently have limits on class enrollment, and there is no indication that this would need to be changed. A required core of courses would end rampant course

proliferation - which is costly.

11. Our faculty would never be able to go through the Process - it would be too divisive - Yes, it's not easy to reach consensus. The faculty at Brooklyn College, according to Ethyle Wolfe, was "highly polarized and characterized by department feelings of territoriality and a determination to maintain their autonomy...it was apparent right from the beginning that departments would have to put students' needs before their own." (Columbia, Feb. 1989)

Miami-Dade also went successfully through the "core" process. In 1974, they did an institutional self-study that indicated a lack of integration and synthesis among the courses and disciplines in the General Education program. They formed committees to study General Education and then went on to identify General Education goals after studying the literature, hearing outside speakers and organizing open meetings with faculty and students. A Draft Proposal was finally formulated based on the work of faculty committees at each of the campuses. NCC, too, can go through the process, and like the two colleges mentioned above, not only be the better for it but also receive national recognition for being able to bring about substantial curriculum reform.

We agree with both Drs. Thomas Leemon and Ethyle Wolfe in their assessment of NCC Faculty as being extremely talented, enthusiastic and professional. These assets, along with a Fairfield County location and a new campus put us in a favorable position to be innovative leaders in community college curriculum development.

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